THE ST. MICHAEL LEGENDS IN ANGLO-SAXON AND MIDDLE ENGLISH

BY

DOROTHY BEAL RUSHING

A.B., Sam Houston College, 1939

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AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS,

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A casual observer is likely to be familiar with the festival of Michaelmas in the church calendar. He may also have noticed that St. Michael appears as the patron of many churches and the subject of much religious art. He is not likely, however, to be conscious of the great body of tradition which has attached itself to the Archangel. It is this tradition which I have here, within certain necessary limits, examined.

The British, even before the Norman Conquest, knew St. Michael in several of his roles. His struggle with Satan and his coming war with Antichrist were alike familiar to them. They also knew of his visits to the earth and of his function as weigher and leader of souls. These four phases of the Michael cult in Britain are treated, in the four chapters which constitute the body of this study, by examination of their occurrence in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English writings. Latin and French versions of the Michael stories current in England during the same period, although undoubtedly they could have added much to the completeness of the study, have been purposely omitted from consideration in order to narrow the problem.

Of the legends themselves it was desirable to try to determine the time and place of their entrance into the British Isles and to decide whether or not the cult could be localized. It was necessary to consider whether or not the legends changed materially after their arrival in England, and what the effects of their British adoption were.

Although the Old Testament as we know it today does not contain an account of the struggle between St. Michael and Satan, the story was familiar to the Hebrews. The usual theory advanced for its introduction into Jewish tradition is that it was brought from Babylonia. The New Testament account of the war in heaven is found in the Revelation of St. John, XII: 7-9.

The extreme popularity of the conception of St. Michael in the role of dragon-conqueror is demonstrated by the frequent occurrence in art, both in England and elsewhere, of St. Michael contesting with the rebel angel. There were definite conventions for the portrayal of both figures. Satan was usually presented as a dragon. St. Michael had certain accepted insignia, a banner hanging on a cross, a flaming sword, a cross on the forehead; his

costume varied with the age and country in which the artist lived. St. Michael in his role of dragon-fighter appears in stained glass and stone in many old English churches; these are not confined to any one section of the island but are widely distributed. An old English coin, the *angel,* shows St. Michael piercing the dragon with a spear.

In various writings of the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English periods we find the story of the war in heaven. Two of the homilies contained in the Blickling group, the "Dedication of St. Michael's Church" and the "Assumption of the Virgin Mary," contain oblique references to St. Michael's war with Satan in that St. Michael appears in both in his character of chief of God's angels, hence God's appointed champion. The marginal sermon (which for convenience I have referred to as *St. Michael*), found in Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS. 41, reviews the deeds of the Archangel in panegyric fashion. Although in prose, it has a recurring refrain: "This is the holy Archangel St. Michael." In the passages dealing with the war in heaven great emphasis is placed on the strength of the Archangel.

The *Early South-English Legendary* version of the war in heaven reveals a sort of secret admiration for Lucifer and dismisses St. Michael's part in the contest with a few perfunctory lines; in this account we find the belief that the outcast angels have become elves. The story of the war in heaven in the fourteenth-century *Cursor Mundi* also makes Satan the central figure and St. Michael, although grim and determined, less important. Another Middle English version appears in the *Speculum Sacerdotale* in which the position of St. Michael is stressed, especially his relationship with God: the fight with Satan seems to be only an incident introduced to help establish that relationship.

The enmity between Michael and Satan did not end with the latter's expulsion from heaven. The New Testament gives an instance of further strife between them in the struggle over the body of Moses (Jude 9). Folk tales of many lands tell of struggles between the vanquished and the victorious angels. Likewise, elves, giants, and trolls, representing the angels who fell with Lucifer, carry on the war which comes to represent the struggle between good and evil. The early fifteenth-century *Festial* of John Mirk mentions some of the ways in which this war was carried on, together with a tale of St. Brandan's encounter with

some of the fallen angels. St. Michael's popularity among men in the role of conqueror of Satan was the probable cause of his assignment to similar roles in struggles against earthly evils.

St. Michael's appearances on earth have always been purposeful. He has come to command the building of churches, to serve as warrior-protector (usually of groups of people rather than of individuals), and to act as heavenly messenger. The appearances of the Archangel most often related in English are the Garganus story and the closely allied Sipontus story; the story of Pope Gregory at the tomb of Hadrian; the story of Monte Tumba, a diluted version of the Garganus story; and the Wilfrid story. All of these seem to have been familiar in England long before the Conquest. Others occur less frequently—the appearance in Cornwall, the appearance before St. Erasmus, and the appearance to St. Christina. The apparitions are difficult to date with any degree of certainty. That at Mount Garganus occurred on the 8th of May, but the year is variously given: some writers place it in the fourth century, others in the fifth or even sixth. The appearance to Pope Gregory seems to have been fairly well established as 590, the year of the great plague in Rome and the year in which Gregory became Pope. There is general agreement that the apparition at Mons Tumba took place early in the eighth century, followed a few years later by the Cornish apparition. St. Michael appeared to Bishop Wilfrid, according to Bede, in 704.

St. Michael as an earthly visitor appears several times in the *Old English Martyrology* of the ninth century. The Garganus story for May 8th, says Herzfeld in his editorial introduction, "shows conclusively that the book was meant for people who were supposed to be well acquainted with the story in question, as it is merely alluded to in a few words and in a superficial manner." For September 29th the Sipontus story with an interesting and significant error is related. Also included in the *Martyrology* are three other earthly appearances of the Archangel: the well-known appearance to Bishop Wilfrid (April 24th), the appearance before St. Erasmus (June 2nd), and before St. Christina (July 19th).

Aelfric tells several of the Michael stories in his *Sermones Catholici,* notably the Garganus story, the Sipontus story, and the "healing waters of St. Michael's cave" detail. Aelfric's version was the standard in England for many years. The sermon on St. Michael in the *Blickling Homilies* coincides very closely

in subject-matter (except for the curious addition of the St. Paul vision) with the Aelfric homily. In vocabulary and syntactical structure, however, they are quite different. In the *St. Michael* the Garganus story is not mentioned, but an odd version of the Sipontus story appears.

The *Early South-English Legendary* relates first the Garganus and then the Sipontus stories. These are little more than rhymed versions of the stories Aelfric told, made more entertaining by the addition of imaginative details. Next, the Mons Tumba story, complete with date, appears, followed by a charming little exemplum.

John Mirk's *Festial* contains an account of the Archangel's Biblical appearances. This catalogue is directly in and of the tradition which assigns almost all appearances of "an angel" or "an angel of the Lord" or "God's angel" to Michael. The purposes of the appearances in the *Festial* are to lead Moses and Aaron with the Israelites to the promised land; to part the waters of the Red Sea; and to bring the Israelites "ouer fleem Jordan" at last. Following the list of Biblical appearances is the Garganus story, then the story of the apparition at Mons Tumba, Cornwall. The stories of Pope Gregory and of Sipontus follow.

The Garganus story appears in the *Speculum Sacerdotale* essentially as it was told by Aelfric several centuries earlier. In addition, this collection contains an interesting tale of the slaying of an earthly dragon which I have not seen elsewhere.

The idea of a guardian spirit, ever watchful and ever present, did not originate with the Christians. This concept is one of the many pagan ideas which the Christians embraced and made their own. St. Michael is particularly popular in this role. The idea occurs in Anglo-Saxon literature in the *St. Michael* and in Aelfric's *Homilies*. In the former, St. Michael is presented as a shepherd of the human flocks; in the latter, the duties of guardian angels are set forth. Michael in his role of guardian angel presented the prayers of the faithful to God, but early English literature offers no direct reference to this office.

As receiver of the human soul after death, St. Michael was very important. Anglo-Saxon and Middle English literature furnish many examples of St. Michael as psychopomp. He appears thus in the description of the death of Adam in the *Early English Homilies*. Several accounts of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, notably those of Aelfric, the *Blickling Homilies*, the *St.*

Michael, and Mirk's *Festial,* emphasize the part played by the Archangel. The greatest comfort that a man could have was to be assured that St. Michael would come to take him to heaven. Truth, in *Piers the Plowman,* promises this boon to the man who has spent his life in good works. In one of the Wulfstan homilies a devil taunts a doomed soul with the vain hope that St. Michael may come for it.

Edward Peacock thinks that the popular devotion to St. Michael in England during the Middle Ages was due in large part to the fact that legends represented him as weighing souls to determine whether or not they should be admitted to heaven. The *St. Michael* presents the Archangel as the weigher of souls in an allegorical fashion. William Hone in *The Every-Day Book and Table Book* relates the story of one of the dream visions called "The Pilgremage of the Sowle," "a very curious spiritualizing romance, originally in French, printed in English by Caxton, in the reign of Edward V," in which the soul, befriended throughout by St. Michael, escapes the dreadful doom of eternal punishment.

St. Michael often acted as conductor or appeared as one of the personages in the dream visions of visits to the Other World. In the *Apocryphon of the Seven Heavens* St. Michael appears in two of the heavens, the first and the seventh. The story of St. Paul and St. Michael's descent into hell and what they saw and did there is related in the *Lambeth Homilies.* St. Julian acts as conductor in the *Vision of Thurcill,* but St. Michael appears during the course of the journey through the Other World. He sits with Peter and Paul to receive the new souls; those which are perfectly white he sends unhurt through the flames to the mount of joy.

The story of Seth's visit to the Other World to obtain from St. Michael the Oil of Mercy for his father, Adam, is often found in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English writings. It was told in the *Gospel of Nicodemus,* which early became popular in England. Seth reports Michael's words to his father in a brief allusion to the story in the *Early English Homilies.* The Oil of Mercy story is the first episode in some of the legends of the Holy Rood. Napier identifies three English versions as derived from a Latin source which he calls the *Legende* and preserving its characteristic features (of which the Seth episode is one): *Story of the Holy Rood, Canticum de Creatione,* and the *Early South-English Legendary.* The story is also found incorporated in its chronological order in the *Cursor Mundi.*

The end of the world, the early Englishman knew, was to come with signs and portents. An incarnate devil called Antichrist would appear in recognizable circumstances. St. Michael appears in the struggle against Antichrist in some of the writings; in others it is Christ himself who will slay the Antichrist. The sermon for Easter Day in the *Blickling Homilies* shows St. Michael triumphant against Antichrist and majestic in his office at the Day of Doom. *St. Michael* also claims for its subject-hero a great victory in the latter days. Wulfstan in his *De Temporibus Antichristi* rather hesitatingly admits that St. Michael may do the actual slaying of the enemy. Brief mention is made of the Archangel struggling with Antichrist in Mirk's *Festial* and in the Middle English metrical translation of the *Revelations of Methodius*. The *Cursor Mundi* in relating the story insists that if St. Michael is to slay Antichrist, it is only through the direct command of God that he does so. The medieval playwrights did not overlook the dramatic possibilities of the battle between St. Michael and Antichrist. They used the story in individual plays and in the closing plays of drama cycles. All of the English cycles refer to the coming of Antichrist, but only the Chester cycle develops a whole play on the basis of it.

It is, of course, impossible to say exactly when and where the Michael legends entered England. They were known in the Irish monasteries of the north of England very early. Bede, who recounts some of the legends, must have found the stories among the manuscripts at Waermouth or Jarrow. There may have been a reinforcement of the legends in the south through the Cornish Mount St. Michael, long dominated by the French Mont-St.-Michel and therefore likely to receive the legends common in the French abbey. Later, of course, the legends already current in England were strongly reinforced by familiarity with the medieval Latin legendaries, martyrologies, *etc.*, which continued to come in from the Continent.

The proportions which the Michael cult assumed in England may be partially determined by the extant manifestations. Ecclesiastical records show 687 dedications of churches to the Archangel before 1500. Michael or St. Michael was used as a place-name, often in compounds such as Michael-on-the-Wyre. In church art St. Michael held a prominent place; the fight with Lucifer was particularly popular with the makers of stained glass windows;

almost every church had a representation of St. Michael weighing souls or receiving souls for their journey to heaven.

Written versions of the legends occur in homilies, church calendars, festials, legendaries, and the like. The popular ballads do not refer to St. Michael; but a Norwegian ballad, the *Draumkvaede,* based on the medieval English vision literature, does have St. Michael as one of the principal figures. In drama the principal appearance of St. Michael is as slayer of Antichrist in the *Antichrist* of the Chester cycle.

The Michaelmas celebrations cannot be taken as a reliable indication of the strength of the cult. Michaelmas came at the harvest season, when a celebration seemed in order, and was actually only the old pagan harvest festival in a thin Christian disguise.

The Michael cult in England exhibited little originality. The legends were widespread and thoroughly familiar in Anglo-Saxon and medieval times; like most English saints' legends they were imitative of their Continental originals in content and even in organization. Although the Archangel clearly had a special place in the hearts and lives of the English people, and though the legends contained matter fit for the artist's hand, none, in the periods covered by this study, lifted that matter above mediocrity.

VITA

Dorothy Beal Rushing was born at Lott, Texas, on June 22, 1912, the daughter of William Jackson and Lynn King Rushing. She attended the Texas public schools, and was graduated from Waco High School in 1929. She attended the University of Texas for two years, and later, Sam Houston College. She was graduated from the latter school with the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1939, and the Master of Arts degree in 1940. From 1940 to 1942 she was a member of the English department at Sam Houston College. From September, 1942, until August 1946, she was an assistant in Rhetoric at the University of Illinois and worked toward the doctorate. Since September, 1946, she has been Associate Professor of English at Sam Houston College.